

Message Text

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INFO OCT-01 SS-15 ISO-00 SP-02 PA-01 SAA-01 SES-02

H-01 INR-10 IO-13 PM-05 NSC-05 (ISO) W

-----077936 111114Z /10 S

P 101156Z SEP 78

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9605

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

USINT BAGHDAD

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

DIA WASH DC

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CIA WASH DC

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 3 DAMASCUS 05304

E.O. 11652: XGDS-3

TAGS: PINR,PINS, PINT, SY

SUBJ: ASSAD'S HEALTH AND TRANSITION

REF: DAMASCUS 5264

1. SUMMARY: IF WE ACCEPT THE WORKING HYPOTHESIS THAT ASSAD IS TERMINALLY ILL (REFTEL), THEN THE IMMEDIATE QUESTION WHICH CAN AFFECT U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN THE AREA IS HOW ASSAD WILL ALTER HIS DECISIONMAKING IN LIGHT OF THAT KNOWLEDGE. ASSAD WOULD BE UNDER PRESSURE TO ATTAIN GOALS QUICKLY WHEREAS HIS NORMAL PATTERN HAS BEEN TO APPROACH ALL ISSUES WITH EXTREME CAUTION AS IF THEY WERE NOT TIME SENSITIVE. OPN THE ISSUES OF MIDDLE EAST PEACE AND ARAB

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UNITY, IT IS CONCEIVABLE THAT ASSAD MIGHT BE marginally MORE FLEXIBLE, BUT IN THE CASE OF LEBANON THE OPPOSITE IS PROBABLY TRUE. THERE WOULD BE CONSIDERABLE TEMPTATION FOR HIM TO PRESS FOR A MILITARY SOLUTION TAKING THE RISK OF ISRAELI INTERVENTION. IF THIS STILL APPEARED TOO RISKY AN UNDERTAKING, THE ALTERNATIVE MIGHT BE precipitous WITHDRAWAL REGARDLESS OF THE CONSEQUENCES. ASSAD'S SUC-

CESSORS, UNCERTAIN OF THEIR POWER, PROBABLY COULD NOT SUSTAIN THE SYRIAN PRESENCE IN LEBANON ANYWAY, AND MIGHT WELL TURN TOWARDS THE LEFT DOMESTICALLY AND THE SOVIET UNION INTERNATIONALLY TO OFFSET THREATS TO INTERNAL STABILITY WHILE THEY CONSOLIDATE POWER. RIF'AT AL-ASSAD, THE PRESIDENT'S BROTHER, LOOMS LARGE AS A CANDIDATE FOR SUCCESSION BUT WE HAVE TOO MANY GAPS IN OUR KNOWLEDGE AT THIS TIME TO MAKE SUCH A PREDICTION. POLITICAL SPECTRUM WILL BE MUCH CLEARER AFTER THE BAATH PARTY HOLDS ITS REGIONAL CONGRESS AND ELECTS A NEW REGIONAL COMMAND IN NOVEMBER. END SUMMARY.

2. PERSISTENT RUMORS AND REPORTS ABOUT PRESIDENT'S ASSAD'S HEALTH HAVE CONVINCED MANY SYRIANS THAT HE IS SERIOUSLY AND PERHAPS FATALLY ILL WITH LEUKEMIA. WE ARE INCLINED TO ACCEPT THIS CONCLUSION, THOUGH IT IS BY NO MEANS PROVEN, AS A WORKING HYPOTHESIS BECAUSE WE CANNOT AFFORD TO IGNORE THE POSSIBILITY THAT ASSAD'S TIME IS LIMITED, GIVEN THE ONE-MAN DECISIONMAKING NATURE OF THE SYRIAN REGIME AND ITS IMPACT ON OUR POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST. WHEN WE SAY HIS TIME IS LIMITED WE DO NOT MEAN IMMINENT DEMISE. THE EVIDENCE ALL INDICATES THAT ASSAD'S ILLNESS, IF HE HAS ONE, IS STABILIZED RIGHT NOW. THE GERMAN MINISTER OF ECONOMY AND THEIR AMBASSADOR MET WITH ASSAD FOR THREE HOURS IN LATAKIA RECENTLY AND CAME AWAY CONVINCED THERE IS NOTHING SECRET

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ING WRONG WITH THE MAN. THEY SPOKE TO ASSAD OF MEDICAL TREATMENT CAPABILITY IN THE FRG IN CONNECTION WITH HIS VISIT THERE AND HE WAS UNCONCERNED. THEY SUGGESTED HE MIGHT WANT TO CURTAIL THE 16-HOUR A DAY PROGRAM PREPARED FOR HIM AND HE ASKED FOR MORE. ASSAD HAS BEEN STICKING TO A SCHEDULE, EVEN DURING HIS SUPPOSED VACATION IN LATAKIA, WHICH MOST HEALTHY MEN COULD NOT WITHSTAND. IN ADDITION TO HIS SEPTEMBER 10-15 VISIT TO WEST GERMANY, ASSAD IS PLANNING A SUBSEQUENT TRIP IN OCTOBER TO EAST GERMANY, POSSIBLY WITH OTHER STOPS IN EAST EUROPEAN CAPITALS. IN ASSAD'S RECENT TELEVISION APPEARANCES HE HAS LOOKED TANNED, HEALTHY, CHEERFUL, AND VIGOROUS. HIS RULE OF SYRIA HAS NOT FALTERED.

3. THE FACT ASSAD REMAINS IN FULL CONTROL AND MIGHT BE SO FOR SOME TIME RAISES THE QUESTION OF HOW HIS KNOWLEDGE THAT HE WAS TO DIE WOULD AFFECT HIS DECISION-MAKING. THUS FAR, WE HAVE SEEN NO POLICY CHANGES THAT MIGHT INDICATE ASSAD KNOWS HIS TIME IS LIMITED EVEN THOUGH WE MIGHT EXPECT HIM TO TRY TO COMPRESS THE PROCESS OF ACHIEVING GOALS HE WOULD LIKE TO SEE ACCOMPLISHED BEFORE HIS DEATH. HOWEVER, HE HAS MOVED THE BAATH

PARTY REGIONAL CONGRESS FROM ITS SCHEDULED CONVENING NEXT MARCH OR APRIL UP TO NOVEMBER THIS YEAR AND MAY BE WAITING FOR THE RESULTS OF THIS CONGRESS AND FORMATION OF A NEW REGIONAL COMMAND BEFORE PUSHING FOR REFORMS HE WOULD LIKE TO LEAVE AS A CAP TO HIS CAREER.

4. IN FOREIGN POLICY THERE IS LITTLE HE CAN DO TO CONTROL THE PACE OR CHARACTER OF MIDDLE EAST PEACE NEGOTIATIONS AS HE CONCEIVES THEM. THE ONLY MAJOR GOAL HE COULD REASONABLY HOPE TO ACHIEVE IN A SHORT TIME FRAME WOULD BE ARAB UNITY OF SORTS. THIS WOULD BE AN APPEALING LEGACY FOR A BAATHI PRESIDENT. THUS, ASSAD MIGHT BE INCLINED TO MAKE THINGS EASY FOR A RECONCILIATION WITH SADAT IF THE BILATERAL TALKS BETWEEN EGYPT AND ISRAEL END. IN GENERAL, ASSAD
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H-01 INR-10 IO-13 PM-05 NSC-05 (ISO) W
-----077957 111118Z /10 S

P 101225Z SEP 78

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9606

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

USINT BAGHDAD

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY BONN

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MIGHT MARGINALLY SHOW GREATER FLEXIBILITY ACROSS THE BOARD IF THIS PROMISED QUICK RETURN IN THE PEACE PROCESS. THE MOST DANGEROUS AREA OF IMMEDIATE CONCERN FOR US, HOWEVER, IS LEBANON AND THERE THE EFFECT OF TIME PRESURE IS LIKELY TO LEAD TO LESS FLEXIBILITY. ASSAD WOULD NOT WANT TO LEAVE THE CURRENT MESS IN LEBANON AS HIS TESTAMENT IN FOREIGN POLICY. THE TEMPTATION TO PRESS FOR A QUICK RESOLUTION OF THE PROBLEMS THERE WOULD BE GREAT. WHEREAS ASSAD HAS LONG BEEN NOTED FOR HIS ABILITY TO LIVE WITH UNCERTAINTY AND AMBIGUITY IN THE EXPECTATION THAT EVENTS WILL WORK TO HIS ADVANTAGE IN THE LONG-RUN, HE MIGHT GROW IMPATIENT UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH AND ACCEPT RISKS HE WOULD HAVE AVOIDED IF TIME WERE NOT A FACTOR. WE HAVE BEEN INCLINED TO DOUBT THAT ASSAD WOULD TAKE THE RISK OF TRYING

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TO CRUSH THE MARONITE MILITIAS MILITARILY BASED ON HIS CHARACTER AND PAST PERFORMANCE. IF HE IS TERMINALLY ILL, HOWEVER, WE HAVE TO ALLOW FOR THE POSSIBILITY THAT HE MAY DO JUST THAT, BASED ON HIS ASSUMPTION HE CAN ABSORB ANY ISRAELI PUNISHMENT, LIKELY TO BE CONFINED TO AIR ATTACKS, AND COUNTING ON GREAT POWER INTERVENTION TO STOP ALL OUT WAR. THE ALTERNATIVE FOR ASSAD WOULD BE TO WASH HIS HANDS OF THE LEBANON, WITHDRAW HIS TROOPS AND SUPPORT THE LEFTISTS AND PALESTINIANS FROM THE SIDELINES IN A RENEWED CIVIL WAR OR EVEN PROXY WAR WITH ISRAEL. THERE ARE ADVOCATES FOR BOTH THE MILITARY AND WITHDRAWAL SOLUTION HERE.

5. THE NEXT QUESTION WE HAVE TO ANSWER IS WHO COMES NEXT. THE CONSENSUS OF MANY DAMASCENES IS THAT, IF THE PRESIDENT LEFT THE SCENE, HIS BROTHER RIF'AT WOULD TAKE OVER EITHER AS PRESIDENT OR MORE LIKELY AS THE POWER BEHIND THE SCENES. THESE LOCAL ANALYSTS ANTICIPATE THAT RIF'AT'S GUNS WILL INITIALLY DOMINATE THE SELECTION PROCESS OF A SUCCESSOR. RIF'AT'S TROOPS TOTALLY DOMINATE THE CITY, PARTICULARLY NOW THAT SIX OF ALI HAYDAR'S NINE COMMANDO BATTALIONS NORMALLY STATIONED IN DAMASCUS ARE IN LEBANON. WHETHER RIF'AT COULD HOLD ON TO POWER WOULD DEPEND ON THE ATTITUDE OF THE ARMY AND THE PARTY. RIF'AT HAS MANY ASSETS IN BOTH AS WELL AS MANY DETRACTORS AND WE HAVE TOO MANY BLIND SPOTS TO MAKE A SENSIBLE ESTIMATE ABOUT HIS CHANCES RIGHT NOW.

6. WE KNOW NOTHING OF THE MILITARY WING OF THE BAATH PARTY, HOW IT IS STRUCTURED AND WHO DOMINATES IT. WE KNOW THAT BAJBUJ, KHULAYFAWI, HADID, AND, POSSIBLY TLASS FROM THE REGIONAL COMMAND WOULD OPPOSE RIF'AT WHILE HALABI, MUSHARQA AND DIAB WOULD SUPPORT HIM. BUT THE REST OF THE COMMAND IS LOYAL TO HAFEZ AL-ASSAD AND WE DON'T KNOW IF THEY WOULD TRANSFER THEIR SUPPORT TO RIF'AT. IN ADDITION,

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WE DON'T KNOW WHAT THE FIELD COMMANDERS OF THE ARMY WOULD DO. THE MAJOR RESHUFFLE IN AUGUST OF ALL DIVISION-AL AND MANY REGIMENTAL COMMANDERS HAS BROUGHT FORTH A CROP OF NEW FACES. THE NEW COMMANDER OF THE THIRD ARMORED DIVISION, SHAFIQ FAYYAGH DIL, ALTHOUGH AN ALAWITE AND A RELATIVE OF RIF'AT, HAS THREATENED IN THE PAST TO "GET THAT S.O.B." WHETHER HE WOULD STICK TO THIS THREAT IF ALAWITE POWER WERE AT STAKE IS QUESTIONABLE.

7. FINALLY, WE HAVE LITTLE IDEA OF ALAWITE ATTITUDES TOWARD RIF'AT. ALAWITES CONTROL THE KEY MILITARY AND SECURITY POSITIONS. WORKING TOGETHER THEY CAN ENSURE CONTINUITY OF ALAWITE POWER, BUT THE QUESTION IS WHETHER THEY WOULD WORK TOGETHER BEHIND RIF'AT. RIF'AT HAS BEEN NOTED FOR PROTECTING ALAWITE INTERESTS AND HE HAS MANY IOU'S OUTSTANDING IN THE COMMUNITY, BUT THE DECISION TO SUPPORT OR OPPOSE HIM WOULD BE BASED ON HIS ABILITY TO PROTECT THOSE INTERESTS IN THE FUTURE AND MIGHT DEPEND ON

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ACTION NEA-10

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H-01 INR-10 IO-13 PM-05 NSC-05 (ISO) W

-----077967 111118Z /10 S

P 101242Z SEP 78

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9607

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

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HIS AGREEMENT TO EXERCISE POWER FROM BEHIND THE THRONE LETTING A SUNNI MUSLIM TAKE THE FRONT POSITION OF PRESIDENT. WITH RIF'AT'S ALLY PRIMIN HALABI, A SUNNI FROM DAMASCUS, CONSTITUTIONALLY DESIGNATED TO TAKE OVER PRESIDENTIAL DUTIES PENDING ELECTIONS IF ASSAD GOES, THE SITUATION IS MADE TO ORDER FOR JUST A DENOUEMENT.

8. ONE THING IS SURE, IF TRANSFER OF REAL POWER DID NOT GO TO RIF'AT, IT IS ANYBODY'S GUESS WHO IN THIS DELICATELY BALANCED POLITICAL STRUCTURE WOULD GET THE NOD. BUT WHATEVER INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS TOOK POWER IN SYRIA WE CAN BE SURE THAT THEIR FIRST INTEREST WOULD BE TO CONSOLIDATE POWER. TO DO THIS THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO SEE INTERNAL DANGERS FROM THE LEFT OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM.
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TRUM AND BEND IN THAT DIRECTION TO MINIMIZE THE THREAT. FOR THE SAME REASON THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO SEEK OUTSIDE SUPPORT FROM THE SOVIET UNION THAN THE U.S. AND TILT THEIR POLICY ACCORDINGLY. IF ASSAD HAS NOT BEEN ABLE TO STABILIZE LEBANON BEFORE HIS DEATH, THEY PROBABLY COULD NOT SUSTAIN THE CONSTANT DRAIN AND IMMEDIATE THREATS POSED BY A CONTINUED SYRIAN PRESENCE THERE AND MIGHT WELL EXTRICATE SYRIA FROM THAT MORASS REGARDLESS OF THE CONSEQUENCES AND LONG-RANGE IMPLICATIONS FOR SYRIA. IN SHORT, THE INSTABILITY BORN OF A CHANGE IN REGIME, IN THE SHORT TERM, WOULD PROBABLY WORK AGAINST U.S. INTERESTS ACROSS THE BORDER. THE LONG RANGE POLICY OF A NEW REGIME AFTER SECURING POWER WOULD DEPEND ON THE CHARACTER OF THE VICTOR, HOW FAR HE HAD TO GO TO SECURE HIS POSITION, AND A HOST OF OTHER CONSIDERATIONS.

9. THE SUCCESSION IS NOT SOMETHING THAT NEED WORRY US RIGHT NOW. ASSAD HARDLY SEEMS TO BE ON HIS LAST LEGS, AND WE WILL HAVE A FAR BETTER PICTURE OF WHO IS ON TOP AFTER THE NEW REGIONAL COMMAND IS ELECTED, PRESUMABLY IN NOVEMBER. WHAT MUST CONCERN US NOW IS ANY EVIDENCE THAT ASSAD MAY BE ALTERING HIS CRITERIA FOR DECISIONMAKING AND EXERCISE OF POWER IN HIS PUTATIVE FINAL MONTHS, PARTICULARLY IN RELATION TO LEBANON, BY DEMONSTRATING GREATER TOLERANCE FOR RISK TAKING IN RETURN FOR FAST RESULTS. SEELYE

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: HEALTH, POLITICAL SETTLEMENT, CHIEF OF STATE, FOREIGN POLICY POSITION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 10 sep 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC05304
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: X3
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780369-0482
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780983/aaaacqvj.tel
Line Count: 329
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: ae6e7053-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 6
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 78 DAMASCUS 5264
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 23 feb 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 1490505
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: ASSAD\ S HEALTH AND TRANSITION
TAGS: PINR, PINS, PINT, SY, US, XF, (AL-ASSAD, HAFIZ)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/ae6e7053-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014